

The Hunt “Wreck”-om



By Brian Wakeling • Illustration by Kelly Kennedy

Recommendation Process

“I can’t believe you changed the application period for pronghorn and elk applications!”

“Why would you suggest closing the mountain lion hunting season in the summer?”

“What did you do to the goose season dates in Units 1 and 27?”

“Where did you get that idea?”

Every time the Arizona Game and Fish Department changes a hunt order that affects a substantial number of constituents, the change takes someone by surprise. That surprise often is expressed in a phone call or letter to the department. Customers usually are equally amazed to learn the original idea came from the public, and that the process for developing that idea into regulation is not nearly as underhanded or nefarious as originally believed.

No, we do not have a “Situation Room” where members of our elite covert operations unit, the Hunt “Wreck” Team, meet (following a security retinal scan) to plot “situations” to spring on the public. Yet the process we use does remain a mystery to many people.

I’ve been involved in developing hunt recommendations for many years as the big game program supervisor in the department’s Game Branch. If you think

of the hunt orders development process as a covert operation, then consider me a “spy who came in from the cold” — and let me lead you into this not-so-secret world.

Guidelines, Recommendations, Orders

It all starts with hunt guidelines. The guidelines provide social and biological parameters to use in setting permit levels and season structures. Some examples:

- Offer at least 2 percent of the general deer hunting opportunity in the form of juniors-only permits.
- Manage mule deer for 15 to 25 bucks for every 100 does.
- Offer juniors-only deer hunts so that the season overlaps a school holiday.
- Manage elk for 20 to 30 bulls for every 100 cows.
- Manage spring turkey for 10 percent to 15 percent hunt success.
- Manage pronghorn for 25 to 30 bucks for every 100 does.

These examples are only a subset of the many guidelines department biologists follow when proposing adjustments to seasons and permits.

Think of hunt guidelines like this: If you were planning a hunting trip with a friend, you might say, “Let’s look for a place with lots of deer habitat, a good campsite and reasonable access.” Guidelines like those would provide helpful pointers later when you planned the details of your hunt, without limiting you to camping in any one specific location. Hunt guidelines work the same way, as general guidance that helps us make more specific plans.

The department will present a general set of hunt guidelines to the Arizona Game and Fish Commission for consideration in August 2007. Once approved, these guidelines will form the framework that the department uses to develop more specific hunt recommendations for Commission orders from fall 2008 through spring 2010. The process is repeated every two years: A subsequent set of guidelines will go to the Commission in August 2009, August 2011, etc.

Once guidelines are approved, department staff use them as tools to develop recommended changes to specific hunts. Hunt recommendations become Commission orders after Commission approval at public meetings following a set schedule.

That is the general framework for the

The Hunt “Wreck”-ommendation Process

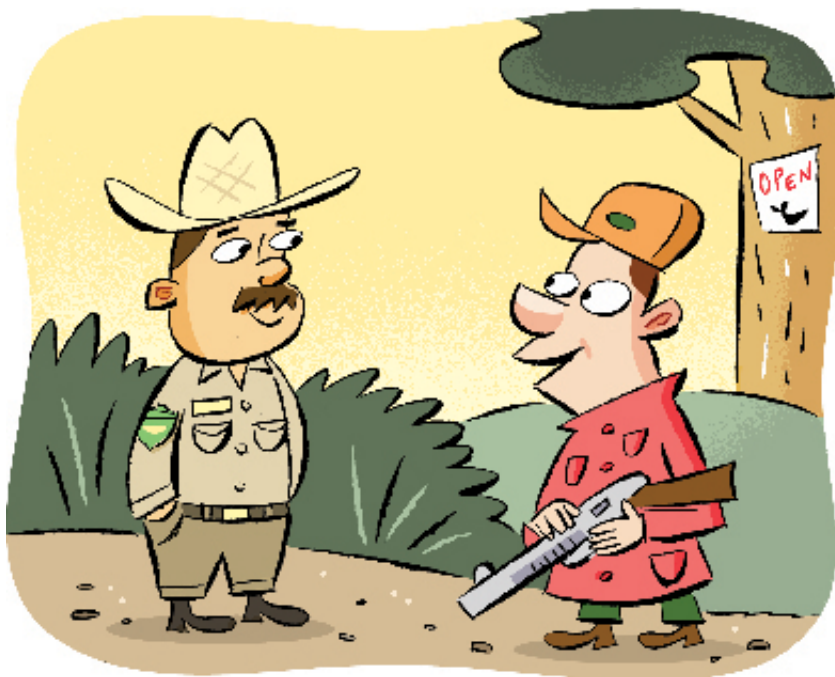
process we use. Up to this point, you still may think we are operating from behind the secured doors of the Situation Room. In truth, the Situation Room is as large as all Arizona, and offers a good deal of opportunity for you, the public, to participate.

Working the Odds (Odd-numbered Years, That Is)

Check the door to the Situation Room in odd-numbered years like 2007, and you'll find it wide open. This is because hunt guidelines are being developed — and we want the public to be involved. The process starts in the field, where wildlife managers and hunters talk about what's working (and what's not).

Wildlife managers spend much of their time in the field surveying wildlife and patrolling hunts. They speak to countless hunters who were successful in the draw, discussing season structures that are working well or those that could benefit from changes. In the course of their work, they also hear from hundreds of other hunters who were unsuccessful in the draw and want to talk about how to increase hunter opportunity.

This public input often is widely disparate in nature. Yet in March and April of odd-numbered years, wildlife managers blend all these suggestions together and advise other members of the department on



the preparation of future hunt guidelines. The proposed guidelines are evaluated by game management staff in the department's regional offices, then forwarded to the Game Branch headquarters in Phoenix.

What does the Game Branch do with the information that comes in from field staff and regional managers? Everyone gets together to evaluate the proposals. Then a small team, representing a cross-section of the department, convenes to discuss changes that might enhance hunter opportunity. The goal is to propose changes to existing guidelines only if these changes yield desirable hunt structures or provide more opportunity for hunters.

To help this small team make its proposals with maximum public input, questionnaires are used as outreach tools to ascertain public opinion on hunting and hunt opportunities. The team assembles a final guidelines proposal package by late May (again, of odd-numbered years). The department's senior staff review the final

proposed guideline package to be certain it is consistent with prior Commission directions to simplify and standardize the guidelines and to capitalize on opportunities to recruit and retain hunters.

The proposed guidelines are shared with the public at open meetings (usually about 11 throughout the state) in June (once more, in odd-numbered years). Those who cannot attend a meeting may e-mail, mail or fax comments to the Game Branch. The department may amend proposed guidelines based on this public input.

Finally, at its August meeting (Say it with me now: in odd-numbered years) the Commission considers department proposals and public input when it provides final direction on the guidelines regarding hunt structures for the next two years.

Now you know that 2007 is a good year for getting involved in the process of developing hunt guidelines. But any year is a good year for participation in the hunt recommendations process.

Statutes, Rules, Orders

Hunting and the hunt development process in Arizona are governed by three tiers of regulations:

Statutes. These include state laws regarding the Arizona Game and Fish Commission (e.g., wildlife classified as big game are defined in statute), and some federal laws, such as the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

Commission rules. These define how statutes are implemented and provide details of processes for implementation (e.g., the draw process is defined in rule).

Commission orders. These set seasons, season dates, bag limits, permit numbers and open areas.

Commission orders may not supersede rules, nor rules supersede statutes.

Hunt Recommendations Timeline

every 2 years during odd years

March–April (odd years)	May	June	August
Field personnel recommend changes	Department completes draft recommendations	Public input, public meetings, mail, fax, e-mail	Commission sets guidelines

Meet the Commission

With guidelines in place, hunt recommendations are formulated for each species. These are considered at the corresponding Commission meeting. Every April, the Commission addresses deer, fall turkey, fall javelina, bighorn sheep, fall buffalo, fall bear and mountain lion seasons. The Commission also addresses small game and trapping seasons at its April meeting during even years (2008, 2010, etc.). In June, seasons are set for webless migratory birds (e.g., dove) and special big game. In August, spring turkey, spring javelina, spring buffalo, spring bear and webbed migratory bird (e.g., waterfowl) seasons are set. In December, the Commission considers pronghorn, elk and population management seasons.

The department sends hunt recommendations to the Commission two weeks before each Commission meeting, and releases this information to the public at the same time. Each regional office (see list on inside front cover) holds a public

open house for people to review these hunt recommendations; staff who are knowledgeable about local factors influencing the recommendation are on hand to explain.

The public's next chance to influence the process is at a Commission meeting, where hunt recommendations are considered and, if approved, become hunt orders. Public testimony has influenced Commission decisions, so public input is important from the first step through the final gavel.

A Not-so-secret Process

The secret is out: The public has many opportunities to enter the so-called "Situation Room" and shape hunt guidelines and recommendations. You may speak to wildlife managers and regional staff at any time to provide informal input. You may get up at a public meeting, but if you'd rather walk through fire than stand at a podium in front of an audience, it may help you to know that comments on hunt guidelines that are e-mailed, faxed or mailed to the

Game Branch are considered equally alongside comments from public meetings. The department analyzes and summarizes all comments and provides the summary to the Commission along with copies of all written comments so commissioners may see the context in which suggestions are framed.

We really aren't covert operatives — we like having your input. Although we are unable to implement every idea, we can make the best decisions when we have the best available data.

As for the ideas at the beginning of this article . . .

- The public told us the late draw date in July did not allow enough time to plan elk and antelope hunts — you wanted an earlier draw. The earlier date was implemented this winter for the first time and attracted more applicants: Total applications for elk remained similar to last year, while applications for pronghorn increased.
- Lion hunters suggested that season closures during summer made sense.
- And it was a goose hunter in Pinetop who suggested amending goose season dates in Units 1 and 27.

Throughout the process of developing hunt guidelines and recommendations and approving hunt orders, the department and Commission implement many ideas from the public. Decisions are made by those who show up. Take the time to share your thoughts when you have the opportunity. Your input is critical to the future of Arizona's wildlife and wildlife management. We need your ideas, even if you think the Hunt Recommendations Team should be called the Hunt "Wreck"-ommendation Team — we can't do it without you. 🦋

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Commission Hunt Set Meetings

annual except where noted

April	June	August	December
deer, fall turkey, fall javelina, fall buffalo, fall bear, mountain lion	webless migratory birds (e.g., doves), special big game	spring turkey, spring javelina, spring bear, spring buffalo	pronghorn, elk, population management
small game and trapping (even years)			